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Looking back at the Anarchist Workers Network

Anarcho

March 3, 2009

A while back I wrote an article for **Freedom** on anarchism and trade unions called “*There is Power in a Union.*” It was a basic introduction to anarchist ideas on the subject and an edited version of it was published in that paper. It was produced to complement a leafleting of a trade union activist meeting in London by the Anarchist Workers Network (AWN). The AWN is now defunct, having failed to produce enough activity or people to take the burden from its founders. Which was, it should be mentioned, the fate of its immediate precursor, the Anarchist Trade-Union Network (ATUN).

The key issues were raised at the end of the article:

“We need to think about how we can work within the labour movement (at the rank and file level, of course) is essential to gain influence for anarchist ideas, just as working with unorganised workers is also important. It means rejecting the ‘one size fits all’ approach on the trades unions that has become sadly dominant in certain parts of our movement.”

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Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from

anarchism.pageabode.com

An article written to learn some lessons from the AWN.

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*When sensible we should be working with the rank and file of the labour movement while keeping our own identity as anarchists and organising as anarchists. In other cases, it may make more sense to form a branch of the **Industrial Workers of the World** (for example) or create an informal grouping like the **McDonalds' Workers Resistance**. No matter the actual concentrate activity, we should be working with the rank and file and trying to create autonomous workplace organisations, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and organised in a libertarian way and using libertarian tactics. This is the aim of the **Anarchists Workers Network**...*

“All revolutionary anarchists support the ideas of workplace organisation and struggle, of direct action, of solidarity and so on. Some anarchists, however, refuse to call these workplace organisations ‘unions’ and instead call them ‘workers’ councils’ or ‘strike committees.’ The name does not matter, the principles are the same. The key difference dividing some anarchists (mostly, but not exclusively, anarcho-syndicalists) from others (mostly anarcho-communists) is on whether such rank-and-file managed bodies should become permanent organisations or not. However, this is a question that is best left to a future date when libertarian ideas have become better known and practised within the class struggle. We are far from being in a position when such a debate will have relevance.

“What we should be concentrating on now is working together and spreading basic anarchist ideas amongst our fellow workers, unionised or not.

This is the rationale of the AWN. It aims to group anarchists who want to influence the class struggle together. It does not aim to become a new federation (SolFed or the AF). Rather it seeks to complement those bodies and be a tool to co-ordinate activity of all anarchists interested in workplace struggle. We aim to give a focus around which anarchists can work together within their unions, for example, to raise anarchist ideas of workers' autonomy and direct action...

“Ultimately, what we do depends on who gets involved and what they want to do. If no one gets involved, the AWN will not exist. It is as simple as that. If you are interested in getting involved then please contact us. We have a world to win!”

Those ideas still ring true. It still makes sense for libertarians to work together to put their ideas across to their fellow workers. It also makes sense to do so on an organised basis with a recognised collective identity. It also makes sense to do so outside the national federations given their current positions and state. In other words, the AWN (or something like it) could and should be created. And this was agreed by people who attended our meeting at the 2003 bookfair and subsequent follow up meeting at Freedom bookshop.

But in spite of the positive response we had, the AWN failed. Why? I think part of the reason is that too few people were willing to put their time and energy where their mouth was. It seemed to be the case that people were happy to be an audience rather than take an active role in doing something. Perhaps the informal nature of the AWN could be blamed for this. It was designed to be a tool, something people could use to get their ideas across. It was not meant to be a formal organisation like the AF or SolFed. Perhaps this very informality

meant that people did not have the organisational framework which allowed the participation the AWN needed to survive. However, to make it a formal organisation would have meant becoming a “rival” to the existing federations and necessitated more political agreement on policies and positions.

Perhaps such a discussion on industrial strategy is needed. It appears that a key problem with anarchism in the UK is its position on the unions. Too heavily influenced by Council Communism, the UK movement has failed to take a realistic approach to the current state of the labour movement. Indeed, this influence can be so bad that a few comrades seriously argue that the trade unions are as much an agent of capital as management or the state. If this really were the case we would have a near 100% unionisation rate and bosses would be encouraging, not fighting, unions across the world. If this were the case, there would be more strikes in workplaces without unions than ones with. That this is not the case suggests that this position is deeply flawed.

The key issue is, I think, lack of perspective. Simply put, I get the impression some people think we are living in the 1970s or early 1980s. While talk of workplace assemblies, strike committees and workers councils is all fine and well, the reality of the situation is that such developments, essential as they are to winning the class war and creating anarchism, are unlikely to happen any time soon. As such, we need to adjust our politics to this reality and help create a movement towards such developments. That, I would suggest, means revising certain currently held positions on trade unions.

Do not get me wrong. The trade unions are bureaucratic, reformist, sectionalist and the leadership will sell you out given half the chance. Yes, the objective pressures of what unions do produce these tendencies and, consequently, even self-managed unionism is subject to reformist and bureaucratic tendencies. Yet these are not good reasons to ignore them, particularly as there is no real alternative at the present

So what could we be doing? Obviously raising the idea of workers' control/self-management of unions, struggles and industry. We should be presenting the idea of co-operatives as an alternative to both nationalisation and privatisation. We should be encouraging of attempts by union members to organise by workplace and industry, overcoming trade union divisions and wrestle control from the bureaucracy. We should organise unions where possible, either existing ones or the IWW (where applicable). We should be co-operating as anarchists in a network to raise a libertarian voice in both the unions base and in the workplace as general. We should be critical of trade unionism while, at the same time, being aware of the current industrial environment and offering realistic alternatives rather than the abstract revolutionary propaganda that so often today passes as an industrial strategy.

If we do not we will be stuck with an anarchism which spends its time expounding which form of (non-existent) industrial grouping is better, an "industrial network" versus a "workplace resistance group." One which splits hairs over whether a (non-existent) revolutionary union movement would be reformist or not. One which discusses the best thing to do during a (non-existent) revolution. One which, ultimately, fails to practice the positive ideas of anarchism in the workplace and labour movement and, consequently, fails to help bring about situations where its correct analysis of the role of trade unionism and its positive alternatives (such as workplace assemblies and strike committees) become relevant. Which would be a crying shame.

time. The sad thing is that outside of the unions there is not much collective action. This suggests that the alternative to being "good trade unionists" is not strike committees, workers' councils and revolution but, rather, nothing beyond abstract revolutionary propaganda directed to workers who fail to see its relevance to their real lives.

If we were living during the 1970s, I could see the point of many current libertarian positions — but we are not. If there was massive levels of strike action and the union bureaucracies were hindering it then the anti-union position would make sense — but there isn't that level of struggle. Indeed, some anarchists use this low level of workplace activity to justify a community organising approach. Instead of a two-pronged approach based on workplace and community, we end up dismissing the former due to the obvious difficulties in workplace agitation. This seems less than convincing, particularly as the workplace experience has hardly got better over the last 30 years!

Perhaps it will be argued that I am attacking a straw man position here. However, I feel that this is not the case. When I read, for example, the Anarchist Federation's (AF) position on trade unions I do not feel that it allows me much flexibility in terms of being active in my local union. It says in no uncertain terms that trade unions are a hindrance to class struggle and I could not in all honesty remain in active in my union and feel I was being true to the spirit of the AF. I know that many AF members are members of the IWW, a contradiction in my eyes. The AF members I have spoken to justify their position by saying the IWW is not a real union but rather a network of militants. Which is true, for the time being. The aim of the IWW is to become a real union. If the IWW became successful then it would do and where would that leave the AF members? They would have helped build an organisation they claim will eventually betray the working class.

Perhaps I am missing something in terms of the AF's position. If so, perhaps someone would enlighten me but I feel that a many of the AF's members are active in ways that contradict their organisations stated position. A position which if contradictory in regard to the IWW becomes a straight jacket when applied to ordinary trade unions. My own experience suggests that the trade unions can be a means by which workers do take action and, as a consequence, anarchists should be active in them at the base.

And what of the alternatives to working in the rank and file of the unions? These boil down, in the medium term, to either dual unionism or workers' councils. Both, I feel, misunderstand the historical contexts of both approaches.

Dual unionism (i.e. building revolutionary unions in opposition to social democratic ones) has been successful. The CNT, IWW and USI were all "dual unions." However, the idea that we can just create them from scratch is false. The history of the formation of dual unions is not along these lines. Every successful revolutionary union came out of, or was built from, existing unions. Take the IWW. Its founding conference in 1905 brought together existing militant unions and built upon a revolutionary union tradition which dated back to the anarchist IWPA of the 1880s. The CNT was formed by the existing unions within Catalonia and, again, built upon a history of anarchist union organising dating back to the 1860s. From this base it quickly became the majority union in the 1920s and 1930s. The USI came out of the syndicalist "direct action committees" which had been created within the social democratic unions in the decade before it was founded in 1912. Its 100,000 members did not just appear and, consequently, it was in a position to play a leading role in factory occupations of 1920. In the UK, the syndicalist building workers union formed in 1914 came out of years of agitation within the existing trade unions.

As for the workers' council idea, this is equally flawed. Looking at Council Communism, the workers unions they founded

were forged in the revolutionary situation itself when existing union members left the social democratic trade unions. If we wait for such a development to happen then, firstly, it probably won't come and, secondly, if it did it would be as unsuccessful as in German or Russian Revolutions. Without an anarchist presence in the workplace, any spontaneous organisation is in danger of being co-opted by the trade union bureaucracy or left-wing parties.

All of which is not to say that strike committees, etc., are not essential or that the trade union bureaucracy will not attempt to stop militant action. Nor is it to suggest that we take part in union bureaucracies or fail to attack the (many) problems of the current trade unions. Far from it. I am not suggesting that we can "capture" the existing unions merely that we have an interest in working within the rank and file to promote libertarian ideas of struggle and organisation. Nor am I suggesting that we reduce our tactics just to that. As my article indicates, we need to apply tactics which are sensible and refuse to squeeze our activity into pre-set positions. All I am suggesting is that it is somewhat optimistic to think that a handful of militants can recreate the labour movement, particularly when their politics effectively cuts them off from rank and file trade unionists who would appreciate the principles they are expounding.

But these are medium term options, options which, while not existing, successfully divide libertarians into different organisations. In the short term and long term, we are more in agreement. Obviously, long term we aim for a libertarian socialist society based on self-management. In the short term, we support all attempts at workers' autonomy and self-management in the class struggle. Perhaps if we looked at these common principles and the current circumstances we could start to apply the more flexible approach suggested in my article? That such a development may need a long hard look at how we organise as anarchists goes without saying, particularly given the fate of the AWN.